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2023 Presidential Election in Türkiye**

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May 2023**

by Mark Meiwitz



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“ADVANCING DIVERSITY”

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Takeaways from the Turkish Elections May 2023

Mark Meirowitz

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Turkey has just gone through one of the most momentous election campaigns in its history. On May 14, 2023, the election for President and for the Turkish Parliament went to a runoff because neither President Recep Tayyip Erdogan (leader of the Justice and Development Party or AKP, and leader of the People's Alliance together with the nationalist MHP party) or Kemal Kilicdaroglu (leader of the Nation Alliance consisting of the Republican People's Party, or CHP, which together with five other disparate parties comprised the so-called "Table of Six") was able to secure a winning vote on the first election round by receiving more than 50% of the national vote.

In the May 14th election, the national vote was very close, with Erdogan securing about 49.5% of the vote and Kilicdaroglu securing about 44.8% of the vote. The AKP Party maintained its parliamentary majority in the Turkish Grand National Assembly. At the first election on May 14th, Sinan Ogan (of the Ancestral Alliance, who previously had been expelled from the nationalist MHP party) achieved 5.2% of the national vote, which took him out of the running for the runoff election. However, Ogan endorsed Erdogan for the runoff election.

At the runoff election on May 28, 2023, Erdogan won the election with about 52% of the vote, while Kilicdaroglu received about 47% of the vote. The turnout for both rounds was impressive, with over 84% of Turkish voters participating. One will not soon forget reports of the man brought on a hospital bed to the polling site and the elderly lady who brought her lamb with her to the polling place. The Turkish diaspora vote was very heavy. Turks around the world and in Turkey took this election very seriously.

Here are some suggested takeaways from the May 2023 Turkish elections, which also address the basic question of how Erdogan won the Presidential election, despite predictions in media platforms around the world that Erdogan was on his way out, and despite rampant inflation, a weak Lira and a devastating earthquake in Turkey on February 6, 2023.

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For The Turkish Elections, It Was Not "The Economy, Stupid"

Relevant here is to recall an expression coined by James Carville, a political strategist for Bill Clinton, during the 1992 US Presidential election "It's the Economy, Stupid," namely that emphasis should be placed by the Clinton presidential campaign on the economic failings of

President George H. W. Bush – and this turned out to be a winning strategy. In Turkey, however, it appears that the economic crisis was not decisive in determining the vote result. Turks voted for Erdogan even with his unorthodox economic strategy that lowering interest rates somehow would improve the economy, an approach widely debunked by economists, and despite the economic crisis and the catastrophic earthquake which resulted in over 50,000 deaths and millions of people displaced from their homes.

It's All About Pride in Turkey's Role in the World- Serife!

I believe that a very significant factor contributing to President Erdogan's victory was how the Turkish people perceived Erdogan - as a global leader – who gave the Turkish people pride in Turkey's accomplishments on the world stage.

Take note of the many heads of State who rushed to congratulate Erdogan on his victory. Over 78 world leaders (including 21 heads of State) attended Erdogan's inauguration. Turkey has been deeply involved in the most significant regional and global issues. Turkey has 142 embassies and 184 consulates around the world. It is involved in the most important bilateral and multilateral institutions and negotiations worldwide. Under Erdogan, Turkey has become a major player on the world scene, its views and positions very often being seen as indispensable (for example, Turkey, with the second largest military NATO contingent, with vitally important military bases, has been the pivotal vote in the accession of Sweden to NATO, and on Ukraine, Turkey has truly been a key and critical actor). Turkey, under Erdogan, has become a global player and a decisive one at that. Turkey participates actively in the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the G20, the Council of Europe, the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) Council and is a Dialogue Partner of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and participates in many more regional and international programs and institutions.

Take note also of Turkey's significant impact on the War in Ukraine. Turkey under Erdogan has been able to multitask with respect to the war in Ukraine: Turkey does not support sanctions against Russia yet provides Ukraine with missiles and drones, including the widely-heralded Bayraktar drone. Erdogan has been pivotal in negotiating with Russia to allow Russian and Ukrainian wheat and fertilizer exports (desperately needed by the rest of the world) to pass through the Black Sea despite a Russian blockade (this deal was extended by two months in the middle of the election campaign in May 2023). Turkey invoked the Montreux Convention, effectively prohibiting Russian and Ukrainian warships from passing through the Turkish Straits, which link the Mediterranean and Black Seas. Erdogan has also been involved in mediation efforts between Ukraine and Russia. At the same time, Russia is building a nuclear plant for Turkey at Akkuyu. Turkey is heavily dependent on Russian energy supplies.

Turkey's rising influence in the world under Erdogan has been shot in the arm for the Turkish people, who have long felt that they have been written off by the rest of the world (and especially by the West) as inconsequential. Indeed, at the beginning of the Twentieth Century, the European powers literally attempted to dismember Turkey (they do not ever forget what they view as the disastrous Treaty of Sevres, which Ataturk described as an effort to "crush the Turkish nation") - Ataturk saved the day and the Turkish Republic was born - the Lausanne Treaty was entered into recognizing the boundaries of the modern State of Turkey.

Turkey's ability to join the EU has been stymied. Turkey has taken in over 3.7 million refugees without receiving the gratitude of the world. As far as the conflict in Syria, Turks believe that their actions there are misunderstood by the West. They believe that Western leaders do not take seriously Turkey's arguments about the existential threat of the PKK in Turkey and the conflict with the YPG and PYD in Syria. So, taking all of this together, Turks have felt that it has always been Turkey on its own against the world.

I believe that many Turks perceive that Erdogan brought pride to the Turkish people and demonstrated leadership and strategic thinking in dealing with allies and foes alike. As such, Turkish voters were willing to overlook the economic crisis and even the alleged slow response of the government to the earthquake when casting their votes (an important factor to be noted, however, is that Erdogan promised that new homes would be built to replace the buildings destroyed during the earthquake as well as pledging that funding would be provided for victims of the earthquake).

The Media Missed the Boat

From their writings and broadcasts, one can glean that many in the Western/US media seemed to engage in wishful thinking, hoping for Erdogan to be defeated. For the most part, they missed the boat by thinking about the Turkish election process with a Western mindset and not from a Turkish perspective. It was not only the Western/US media that made fundamental errors - hilarious to see the headline in Cumhuriyet, which, following the first election on May 14th, ran a headline that stated "Erdogan Kaybetti - Erdogan Lost" reminiscent of the headline in the Chicago Daily Tribune during the 1948 US presidential election which pronounced that "Dewey Defeats Truman" because the newspaper editors were confident that Thomas Dewey would defeat Harry S. Truman (Truman won!) - that newspaper headline has become a favourite of historians to show that predilections and biases don't amount to facts.

The following observation in an opinion piece by a journalist who writes for the Washington Post says it all: "Erdogan won. But that is not the end of the story. Nearly half of Turkey's voters -- 25 million voters, most major cities, the coastline, the educated, the best and brightest -- said they wanted change -- and democracy. Let's not lose sight of that". It would seem to be somewhat difficult to assume, as this journalist did, that none of the "educated, the best and the brightest" in Turkey voted for Erdogan. This is

quite reminiscent of Hillary Clinton's describing Trump's voters as "deplorables" during the 2016 presidential campaign. Other unforgettable headlines appeared in the American press: "Turkey's President Amassed Power. He Could Still Lose This Election", "Yes, Erdogan's Rule Might Actually End This Weekend", and "Is this the End of Turkey's Erdogan?" There were many more such headlines in the Western/US media.

Failure of the Opposition

Clearly, Kilicdaroglu turned out not to be the optimal presidential candidate. Turks were well aware of his history of losing elections. The "Table of Six" had rickety legs - the only glue that kept these very diverse ideological parties together was their common cause against Erdogan. The coalition was quite unstable from the outset, with Meral Aksener, the leader of the Iyi or Good Party (a very significant party in the coalition), dropping out of the coalition and then rejoining. The fact is that Turks have not historically favoured or thrived under coalition governments (this is also true elsewhere in the world - when coalitions win an election - the first thing they do, if they win, is to fight over influence and power in the Parliament and in the ministries). Also, the Kilicdaroglu coalition had a number of parties of minuscule influence and others with much greater consequences (CHP and IYI).

Further weakening Kilicdaroglu was the Nation Alliance's promise that if they won, they would turn Turkey back to a parliamentary system (from a presidential system) and introduce other reforms - but once the AKP party won the majority in Parliament on May 14th, that plan to change to a parliamentary system and introduce reforms was dead in the water because the Kilicdaroglu coalition (given the AKP majority) did not have enough votes in Parliament to implement these changes. Also, Kilicdaroglu made a huge gamble for the runoff election to become more nationalistic and ran on a platform of expelling the Syrian refugees. In addition, the fact that the Table of Six/Kilicdaroglu had the support of the Kurdish HDP Party (the party did not formally join the Nation Alliance but supported Kilicdaroglu's candidacy) was used by Erdogan, claiming that the HDP Party was linked somehow to the Kurdish Terrorist PKK and therefore also to Kilicdaroglu. All in all, Kilicdaroglu was a weak performer. Commenting on Kilicdaroglu's videos from his modest kitchen during the campaign (in which he told young voters who cared about justice, freedom, voting and democracy to give him a first-round victory that would change the world), Erdogan commented, "Someone is in the kitchen, and we are on the balcony" likely referring to Erdogan's speaking to the masses of voters assembled in front of the AKP headquarters.

Postscript

The election is over, and now it is the economy that counts- no more kicking this can down the road - Erdogan has appointed as Treasury and Finance Minister Mehmet Simsek, as well as Hafize Gaye Erkan as the head of the Central Bank (the first woman to hold this position who has deep experience in finance having worked at Goldman Sachs and served as co-

CEO of First Republic Bank). Simsek is an advocate of orthodox financial policies who previously served as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance. A financial commentator was of the view that Simsek “has a lot of credibility with the global investing public”. Interest rates have, as of this writing, been raised to 15%, not quite what the doctor ordered in order to fix the economic problem entirely, but certainly a step in the right direction. The key here is to show the world that Turkey is taking the necessary steps to repair its deep economic crisis, and having this team on board will hopefully be very helpful in achieving this goal.

To direct foreign policy, Erdogan called upon his director of intelligence Hakan Fidan to take the position of Foreign Minister. Fidan is very knowledgeable on foreign policy issues and already knows many of the world’s leaders.

Turkey’s foreign policy initiatives are wide-ranging and have impacts on the region and the world. In my view, Erdogan will want to establish further his imprint on regional and global affairs during the upcoming five-year presidential term. The elections are over, and the challenges are formidable. Let us hope that Turkey, under Erdogan’s leadership, will be able to overcome its difficult challenges and build a great future for all of the Turkish people, and encourage peace and stability in the region and in the world. Also, let us hope that Erdogan’s message in his Victory Speech can really be implemented, namely that it is the time to “unite and get together around our national goals and dreams”.

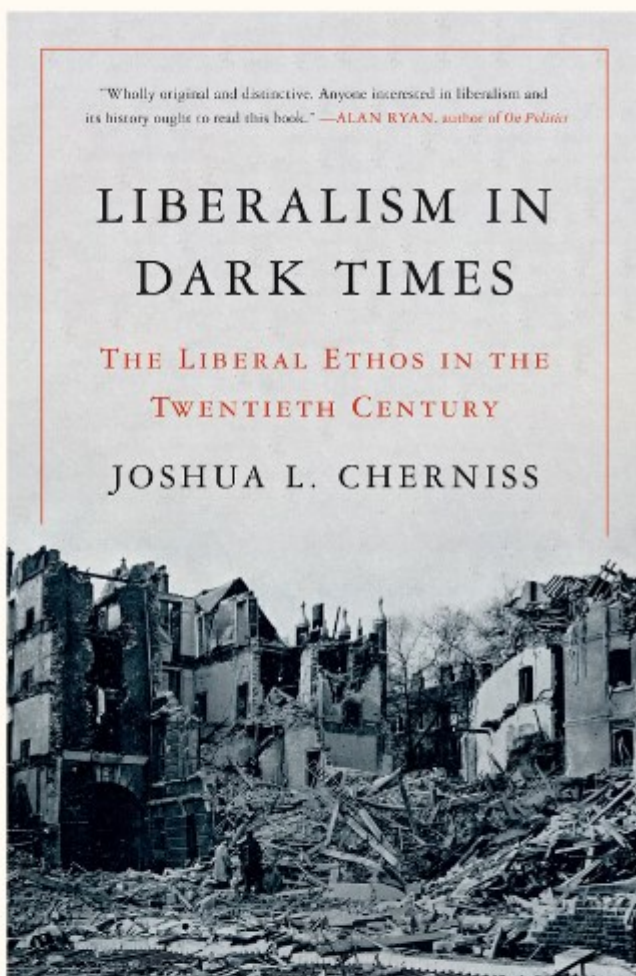
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